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DE RUEHAH #1605 3501302
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 151302Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1991
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4590
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2394
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2259
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2838
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 3144
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 001605

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SUNDAY MEJLIS ELECTIONS NOT A
PRIORITY FOR VOTERS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) On December 14, Mejlis election day, embassy officers surveyed polling stations in various parts of Ashgabat in order to get a sense of the atmosphere and level of activity. The elections presented Turkmen citizens with the opportunity to vote for a largely new crop of Mejlis (parliamentary) deputies -- incumbents made up only a small percentage of the candidates. Altogether, officers drove by some 20 polling stations to get a feel for public participation in the process. Few signs of life were evident around any of the polling stations.

13. (SBU) The weather on election day in Ashgabat was sunny, beautiful, and in the 60s. At 7:00 a.m. Sunday morning, traditional live music began pouring from a polling station closest to U.S. residences. Polling stations in Ashgabat were at secondary schools and other government buildings, and opened at 8:00 a.m. Most had long tables of food and drink sitting outside. Residents reported that some polling sites hosted live music and dance performances in the first hour that polls were open. Several had traditional Turkmen music playing over a PA system, ostensibly to remind those in the neighborhood that it was time to go to the polls. Of the six polling stations poloff drove by, only two people at most were visible outside the buildings, manning a registration or food table. Two people unaffiliated with the station's operations were observed approaching two of the polls in the course of the afternoon.

14. (SBU) The lack of activity stood in stark contrast to the chorus of other outdoor activities that many residents were undertaking in the pleasant weather. Children were playing outside, men washed cars, poloff noted at least four weddings underway, and the bazaars were filled with people buying and selling things. There appeared to be more public activity in relation to the Kurban Bayram holiday. Buildings and streets were festively decorated, and men stood outside of homes and apartment buildings stirring wide pans of the holiday dish, plov.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite an official report of almost 94 percent voter turnout, the view on the ground suggested a

much lower figure. All seats were contested by more than one candidate, but that failed to generate excitement. One would hardly know an election was taking place. Most people, in Ashagabat at least, had better things to do than go vote.

MILES